

**Statement  
Before the Montana Environmental Quality Council  
Re: HJ 13 Study  
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Mr. Chairman and members of the Council:

I'd like to thank you, Mr. Chairman, and Representative White for inviting me to speak here today. The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation has a keen interest in the study before you. We work to ensure the future of elk, other wildlife, their habitat and our hunting heritage. We are based in Missoula with 220,000 members nationwide and more than 13,000 in Montana. We have protected or enhanced more than 6.7 million acres of elk habitat around the country with the help of more than 11,000 volunteers.

Let's discuss the issues affecting hunting opportunity in Montana.

## **Roads**

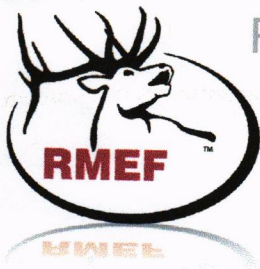
The premise of HJ 13 is federal agencies have eliminated and restricted access to roads—reducing public access to public lands for hunting and other recreation. The US Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management provided solid evidence about the federal road system in Montana at the last EQC meeting and explained why some segments are removed from service. Wildlife security, reclaiming of unauthorized routes, lack of resources for maintenance and compliance with resource protection laws were all discussed.

## **Access**

We believe the primary reason for reduced hunting opportunity in Montana is increasing development in critical elk habitat and the concentration of elk herds on private lands inaccessible to the public.

HJ 13 claims diminished access on federal land has reduced hunting opportunity and shifted hunting pressure to private land. The EQC study and harvest reports from the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks suggest hunting access to federal land remains robust while elk numbers continue to increase—along with hunter harvests. Unfortunately, elk are increasingly seeking refuge on private lands—many of which are not accessible to the public. This situation has led to over-objective elk populations in some hunting districts and has tested the limits of landowner tolerance for elk and their impacts on crops and fences. The debate over objective numbers versus carrying capacities for hunting districts makes elk population management a difficult





proposition and leads to conflict between public land hunters and private landowners. Hunters want to see populations at or near carrying capacity while landowners often have little tolerance for high numbers of elk because of crop damage and other issues. The Elk Foundation has consistently supported late season cow elk hunts to help address these issues.

## **Predators**

Forests have also experienced a significant increase in predators over the past several years. Wolves, bears, mountain lions and even coyotes have a tremendous impact on elk, moose and deer numbers and where they concentrate. Predators have moved elk to private lands and river bottoms. They're safer next to the homestead than they are on the mountain. RMEF staunchly supports predator management in the forms of hunting and trapping as a means to maintain sustainable predator populations and a balanced landscape for elk and other wildlife. We've also provided more than \$725,000 in grants to universities to increase scientific understanding of these issues.

## **Habitat**

Our public lands once had healthy, diverse ecosystems with early successional and mature forests that provided cover and forage for elk and other wildlife. They have become monocultures of insect and disease-ridden and dying timber ripe for catastrophic wildfire. These are not healthy landscapes in which elk and other wildlife can thrive. Elk often find the types of forests and forage they need on private, rather than public land.

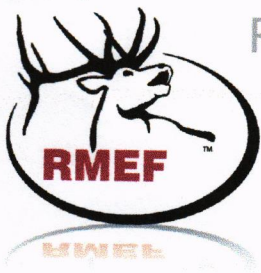
## **Pressure**

Human and hunter pressure, especially in the western part of the state, certainly impacts hunting opportunity. People hiking, cutting firewood, pleasure driving, camping, berry picking, bird watching and bird hunting are all out in the woods in the fall. All of these multiple recreational activities, along with elk hunting, place a tremendous amount of pressure on wildlife security and impact their behavior.

## **So what is the Elk Foundation doing about it?**

### **Forestry Reform**

We support forestry reform efforts in Congress to reverse this trend and provide funds for forest stewardship projects to help improve forest health. Our volunteers help make them happen. RMEF calls on environmental groups who resist any forestry reforms to work with those who do support such change to improve the long term conditions of our public lands for the sake of wildlife and other resources. While gridlocking forest management, we are literally watching forests burn beyond acceptable levels—eliminating viable elk and other wildlife habitat for decades. Management by extreme ideology is not working for anyone.



## **Public Access to Public Lands**

One of RMEF's primary functions is increasing public access to public lands. Since 1984, RMEF has opened, secured or improved public access to more than 823,000 acres of elk habitat across the country for hunters, hikers, anglers and other outdoor enthusiasts to enjoy. RMEF has opened its checkbook to invest in opportunities to access more public lands as well as to enhance more public land in terms of habitat restoration and improvement.

RMEF continually seeks ways to enhance hunter and recreationist opportunity by working with landowners, the US Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, state agencies and conservation partner groups. Our public access tools include land projects, easements and contributions.

## **Land Projects**

For land projects, we purchase important elk habitat from willing sellers and seek to convey that property to a federal or state management agency. Public access to these properties is always a top priority.

## **Easements**

RMEF works with partners to negotiate road or trail easements that allow public access through privately held land. Access may be by vehicle, foot, horse or other means. Such projects open or improve access to large chunks of public lands that are inaccessible or mostly surrounded by private land.

## **Contributions**

RMEF awards grants to state agencies for their hunter access programs. These funds are used to maintain or create new areas for public access.

We also recently provided funding to MTFWP so they could hire coordinators to help hunters gain access to private lands for the new shoulder season hunts.

## **Conclusion**

While we believe the study initiated by HJ 13 brought forth valuable information about federal roads in Montana, public access and hunter opportunity and success, we believe decisions about such roads are best left to the agencies responsible for their management—with input from Montana FWP.

We will also continue our work with state and federal agencies to enhance public access to public lands and improve wildlife habitat.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment.

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